Chapter 1:  The Age of Responsibility

Personal responsibility is a central value of our time. In politics, it takes on a special prominence in the speeches of Republicans, who invoke responsibility to argue that the state should play a strictly limited role in providing welfare for its citizens. But it is nearly as pervasive in the speeches of Democrats, who increasingly justify state interventions in the economy by the need to protect those who have acted responsibly from the vagaries of the market. Insofar as he has advocated for redistributive policies, for example, Barack Obama has justified them in a roundabout manner, by the need to do right by those Americans who “work hard and play by the rules.”

Meanwhile, he has frequently used his bully pulpit to exhort

1 Barack Obama intoned this theme particularly clearly at the 2012 State of the Union address:

Let’s never forget: Millions of Americans who work hard and play by the rules every day deserve a government and a financial system that do the same. It’s time to apply the same rules from top to bottom. No bailouts, no handouts, and no copouts. An America built to last insists on responsibility from everybody.

Barack Obama: “Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address,” The White House website, 01/24/2012, available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-
a whole range of audiences—from the nation’s schoolchildren he addressed via video on their first day of school back in 2009\textsuperscript{2} to the graduating seniors of historically black Morehouse College\textsuperscript{3}—to live up to their responsibility.

The wide appeal of personal responsibility doesn’t just make it a prominent slogan for politicians seeking office; to a striking extent, most political philosophers, while disagreeing about the exact nature and meaning of responsibility, are similarly univocal in affirming its importance. Indeed, while responsibility has long been a dominant theme in libertarian and conservative political thought, even egalitarians from Ronald Dworkin to G. A. Cohen eventually made it a central tenet of their thinking.\textsuperscript{4}

Mentions of responsibility have not always been as frequent, or as uncontroversial, as they are now. Throughout much of the postwar era, philosophers, sociologists, and even many politicians thought that a focus on the personal responsibility of


individuals was, at best, a distraction. In their minds, it was larger structural and normative questions that really mattered. What kind of distribution of economic resources should we aim for? What influence do a mother’s class, race, and geographic location have on the prospects of her children? And what duties do we have toward the destitute, irrespective of what may be the reason for their misfortune? Insofar as they talked about responsibility at all, they usually meant (as I shall argue in Chapter 2) not the responsibility that each person has to be self-sufficient—but rather the responsibility we all have to help our fellow citizens.

The shift from an emphasis on structural, society-level considerations to an emphasis on the individual and his or her responsibilities first became apparent to a mass audience thanks to the conservative revolution of the early 1980s (though its intellectual roots had been growing for years). This renewed focus on personal responsibility was, for example, the implicit theme of one of Ronald Reagan’s most famous lines: “We must reject the idea that every [time] a law’s broken, society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.” Indeed, for many of its most enthusiastic followers, the “Reagan Revolution” consisted precisely in the

5 For a more detailed account of this shift of emphasis in both philosophy and the social sciences, see my account of the recent intellectual history of responsibility in Chapter 2.

conjunction, as the stock phrase goes, of “free enterprise and personal responsibility.”

Realizing how resonant their emphasis on responsibility was with the wider public, right-wing politicians started to use their buzzword to attack the welfare state. Then something unexpected happened: the leaders of the center-left quickly followed along their footsteps. When U.S. politicians on both sides of the aisle conspired to “end welfare as we know it” in the 1990s, the very name of the act which brought about the most fundamental overhaul of the American system for social provision in half a century invoked their new favorite moniker: it was called the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” In Europe, politicians like Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder quickly followed suit, justifying their own welfare reforms in strikingly similar language.

Historians and sociologists have struggled to characterize our political moment. According to various interpreters, we live in a “risk society,” in the “age of

7 For a succinct history of some of these changes, see for example David Harvey: A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

8 For a much more detailed treatment of responsibility and the welfare state, see Chapter 3 on “The Welfare State in the Age of Responsibility.”

globalization,” suffer from “turbo-capitalism,” “casino capitalism,” or widespread “financialization,” or have entered a “new Gilded Age.” Each of these descriptions draws attention to important aspects of our time. But, on my view, all of them neglect another, just as important, feature of recent social and political changes. Over the last thirty years, the notion of personal responsibility has become central both to our moral and political discourse, and to our actual public policies. It is no exaggeration to say that we now live in an “age of responsibility.”


The ambition of this dissertation is to understand the age of responsibility; to criticize it; and to start building the intellectual foundations that will help us to overcome it.

I The Concept of Responsibility in Contemporary Politics

The ubiquity of talk about responsibility hides as much as it reveals. As is the case with other ubiquitous political watchwords, from freedom to democracy, the meaning of responsibility has remained amorphous even as its uses have multiplied. So what do philosophers, politicians, and ordinary voters actually have in mind when they invoke responsibility? More specifically, who is held to be responsible for an action or outcome in the age of responsibility, and what actually follows from such ascriptions of responsibility? To answer this question, I focus on contemporary political discourse in this section; contemporary debates in political philosophy in the next section; and a standard left-wing response to the prevailing discourse on responsibility in the following section. Together, I argue in the final section of this introductory chapter, these three discourses add up to what I call the “responsibility framework”: a standard repertoire of thinking about responsibility, which allows for variation, but centers around a common theme.

As popular a buzzword as responsibility is liable to be invoked in a lot of different—at times even in mutually inconsistent—contexts. But despite its amorphousness, it
is possible to give a rough account of the basic set of assumptions and beliefs that the constant reference to responsibility invokes. In the postwar years, there used to be a broad societal consensus that many of the duties the state owes to its citizens are largely independent of the choices those citizens have made. If somebody is starving in the street, the state has a duty to help him or her—even if it should be true that they wouldn’t have been in need of the state’s assistance had they not whittled away their money in some frivolous manner.\(^\text{17}\) Today, by contrast, more and more welfare commitments are conditional on good, or “responsible,” behavior.\(^\text{18}\) While opinion polls show that most voters are still happy to help those of their fellow citizens who are destitute for reasons beyond their own control, for example due to a physical disability they have had since birth, a growing number of voters and politicians (as well as the actual institutional arrangements they have put in place) deny that similar duties should also extend to people who have acted “irresponsibly.”

The goals which both moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats professed to pursue in passing the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” bear witness to the power which this way of thinking about


responsibility now exerts. On their view, the existing entitlement system provided assistance indiscriminately, to the deserving and the undeserving alike. To change this, they agreed on a host of tough reforms. In the new “workfare” system, cash benefits for most recipients would be dependent on a demonstrated willingness to work.\textsuperscript{19} By imposing strict lifetime limits on the receipt of benefits, people who had a long-term pattern of needing assistance were given the strongest possible incentive to look after themselves.\textsuperscript{20} And by further shifting funds for poverty alleviation to the Earned Income Tax Credit, only the diligent would benefit from public largesse.\textsuperscript{21} All of these measures were explicitly designed to reward those people whom the lawmakers considered “responsible,” and to punish those others they considered “irresponsible.” As Bill Clinton declared when he signed the legislation into law, the new welfare regime “demands [more] personal responsibility.” It has, he contended, driving the same point home yet again, the purpose of promoting the “fundamental values of work, responsibility, and family.”\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} As Clinton declared: Today, I have signed into law H.R. 3734, the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.” While far from perfect, this
Talk of responsibility isn’t just a striking feature of contemporary political speeches, then; as I argue in Chapter 3, popular notion of who has failed, or lived up to, their personal responsibilities increasingly determines who receives public assistance and who is left to fend for themselves.

Welfare reform did not just bring about a radical overhaul of public assistance programs in the United States; it also crystallized a strong bipartisan consensus around the idea that a citizen’s claim to assistance is fatally undermined if he or she is found to be responsible for that bad outcome. But this begs a prior question: in contemporary political discourse, under what circumstances is a citizen presumed responsible for such bad outcomes?

As I show in Section IV there is less general agreement about this question: in particular, significant parts of the left, having conceded that the state’s duties towards those who have brought their suffering upon themselves are limited, have reasserted the need for welfare by arguing that most of the poor or destitute are not responsible for their lot. But this objection notwithstanding, mainstream politicians legislation provides an historic opportunity to end welfare as we know it and transform our broken welfare system by promoting the fundamental values of work, responsibility, and family. This Act honors my basic principles of real welfare reform. It requires work of welfare recipients, limits the time they can stay on welfare, and provides child care and health care to help them make the move from welfare to work. It demands personal responsibility, and puts in place tough child support enforcement measures. It promotes family and protects children.

as well as many ordinary voters tend to assume that people are responsible for an outcome if only some choice or attribute of theirs has helped to bring it about—even though all kinds of factors outside their control may also have contributed to that result. Thus, an entrepreneur is thought to be fully responsible for earning millions of dollars if his skill and hard work has contributed to his company’s success. Similarly, a poor person is thought to be fully responsible for being destitute if the fact that he dropped out of high school helps to explain why he lost his job.

In fact, the assumption that there is a direct and uncontroversial link between an agent’s being responsible for a particular act and an agent’s being responsible for an outcome to which that act was one of multiple contributing factors is so common that attempts to call it in question tend to be highly unpopular. Take, for example, what turned out to be perhaps the most controversial line of Barack Obama’s reelection campaign:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.23

The reason why these remarks proved so controversial24 has a lot to do with their implicit challenge to widely endorsed notions of individual responsibility: in


24 According to CNN, for example, attacks on this remark were a “cornerstone of [that] year’s Republican National Convention.” See CNN Wire Staff: “You didn’t build
emphasizing that entrepreneurs are not solely responsible for their own success, Obama was complicating the direct link between individual action and ultimate outcomes to an extent that many voters are not willing to entertain. But this goes against one of the fundamental assumptions of our political moment: Barring exceptional circumstances, we are supposedly responsible for how well we are doing. And so the welfare state should, of course, be limited to helping that minority of our fellow citizens who finds themselves in need due to just such exceptional circumstances.

Taken together, these answers start to add up to an inchoate, implicit and imperfect—but, for all of that, logically unified—framework. In mainstream political discourse, citizens are held responsible for an outcome if only some act or attribute of theirs actively contributed to it. Once responsibility for the outcome has been ascribed to them in this manner, this has a direct influence on the degree to which they can count on society's assistance: if they themselves are to blame for being in a state of need, they forego much of the moral entitlement to the collectivity's assistance which they might otherwise have enjoyed. As I will argue in the following sections, political philosophers, though they are much more circumspect about the circumstances in which we can ascribe true moral responsibility for actions or outcomes to citizens, share the basic contours of this framework to a surprising extent.

II The Concept of Responsibility in Contemporary Political Philosophy

The turn towards responsibility has been just as marked in academia, and especially in political theory, as it has been among the general public. As I shall argue in Chapter 2, an earlier generation of philosophers had a largely ahistorical approach to justice that made questions of individual responsibility peripheral to mainstream debate. Many egalitarians, for example, used to be committed to a particular distribution a society should seek to achieve, irrespective of the choices that individual citizens had made. Today, by contrast, most Anglo-American philosophers, in determining what just entitlements we have, give great importance to the way in which our present entitlements have been influenced by actions for which we are responsible. Indeed, even most far-left philosophers now emphasize the importance of choice.

So-called “luck egalitarians,” for example, believe that even significant material differences that are a direct result of differential choices are perfectly just; an unequal pattern of distribution in the present can therefore be fully justified by our past actions. As G. A. Cohen has put the point, by recognizing the “centrality of

choice,” this increasingly influential tradition “has, in effect, performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the anti-egalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility.” 26 As a result, the key normative assumption of the age of responsibility is now widely shared even among left-leaning political philosophers: insofar as somebody has less, even much less, because of their own choices, this inequality is justified—there can be no claim of justice for the state to come to the rescue of a poor person who has brought his poverty upon himself.

But while political philosophers have elevated the concept of responsibility to a position of unprecedented importance, they realize that the question of whether or not we are responsible for particular outcomes is far more complicated than public discourse usually assumes. Over the last decades, as the relevance of choice to questions of distribution has become widely accepted, philosophers have therefore proposed ever more subtle and demanding accounts of the kinds of choices that could potentially justify material inequalities.

Ronald Dworkin made an important early contribution to this debate by distinguishing between “option luck” and “brute luck.” According to Dworkin, there is a big difference between good or bad luck in situations which we consciously...

choose to enter and good or bad luck in situations to which we are exposed for reasons beyond our control:

Option luck is a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out—whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and might have declined. Brute luck is a matter of how risks fall out that are not in that sense deliberate gambles. If I buy a stock on the exchange that rises, then my option luck is good. If I am hit by a falling meteorite whose course could not have been predicted, then my bad luck is brute.27

A basic element of Dworkin’s position, as well as of the wider luck egalitarian project it helped to inspire, is that we should be compensated for the differential effects of brute luck, but not for the differential effects of option luck. In other words, we are responsible for outcomes that come downstream from deliberate choices we make (including choices to be exposed to particular risks), but not for outcomes that befall us without our doing.

Dworkin’s distinction has proved extremely influential. But it is difficult to apply to real life cases, for both conceptual and empirical reasons.28 The empirical difficulties are straightforward. To know whether a citizen is responsible for being in need of collective assistance on Dworkin’s conceptual scheme, we would have to be able to answer such hypothetical questions as whether they might now be employed if they hadn’t taken particular bad decisions. Would they have a job if they had worked

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hard enough to graduate high school, for example, or would the bad quality of the schools in the neighborhood in which they grew up, coupled with the paucity of available jobs in their area, have doomed them to poverty in any case?\(^{29}\) Clearly, for a real-world state bureaucracy to answer such intricate hypothetical questions about millions of citizens would—even if we were willing to tolerate the associated normative costs, including the requisite invasion of privacy—be all but impossible.\(^{30}\)

What’s more, even if all the requisite empirical evidence were miraculously available to us, the conceptual difficulties might turn out to be just as real. Take an example. If I develop some rare disease, this seems to be a matter of bad brute luck: after all, I did not ask to be exposed to this biological danger. But from another point of view, it might be considered an instance of bad option luck: after all, I could have taken out a comprehensive insurance against the material costs of developing cancer. What, though, if the disease from which I suffer is so rare that it would have been very cumbersome for me even to find out about it? Or if insurance coverage for this kind of expense had only recently been introduced, and remained unknown to most citizens? In any real life case, these kinds of questions would make it very difficult, on conceptual as well as empirical grounds, to determine where exactly the boundary between brute and option luck should be drawn.

\(^{29}\) See the more extensive discussion of this topic in Chapter 6, below.

\(^{30}\) I discuss the empirical and normative difficulties involved in any attempt for welfare bureaucracies to determine the degree of an applicant’s responsibility for their need in much greater detail in sections IV and V of Chapter 3, below.
That's not the end of it. For more recent research by philosophers like Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen and Peter Vallentyne has put pressure on the normative significance of Dworkin's distinction between brute and option luck, and thereby made ascriptions of responsibility even more challenging. On this view, the fact that one person who suffers from a rare disease has purchased extensive insurance, while the other has not, is not sufficient normative justification of the resulting material differences. After all, it may be that the person who purchased insurance was a lot wealthier to start off with, so that his decision to purchase insurance did not conflict with his other life goals in a comparably significant fashion. Thus, Dworkin may have been wrong to hold that the mere fact that we have made a particular decision which caused a particular outcome would be enough for us to have full responsibility for the end result. On the contrary, the degree to which our differential choices can justify differential distributional outcomes depends on how similar our original choice sets were.\footnote{For two of the most interesting articles in this vein, see Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen: “Egalitarianism, Option Luck, and Responsibility,” \textit{Ethics} Vol. 111/3, 2001, 548-579 and Peter Vallentyne: “Brute Luck, Option Luck, and Equality of Initial Opportunities,” \textit{Ethics} Vol. 112/3, 2002, 529-557.}

Normatively, these arguments are convincing. Empirically, they present even greater difficulties. For if the prospect of figuring out whether a particular outcome was a result of brute or option luck was daunting, the prospect of having to figure out the relative value of the bundle of choices available to different actors in society is close to hopeless. Indeed, what would be required to determine the extent of a person's responsibility for an outcome now includes not only a close-to-perfect

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account of their talents, financial circumstances, and knowledge about the world—but also the same set of facts about all of their fellow citizens. (When I discuss the welfare state in Chapter 3, I will engage more closely with the real-world difficulties, and normative costs, presented by any attempt to figure out, even at a very rough level, whether or not a destitute person is himself responsible for needing society’s assistance.)

To what degree these kinds of objections about the real world should also make us skeptical of the increasingly central role that considerations about responsibility play in “ideal theory” is beyond the scope of my dissertation.\(^\text{32}\) Clearly, on some accounts of the purposes of political philosophy, the fact that the optimal rules of social regulation would never be able to facilitate such fine discriminations between the responsibility of different agents in our non-ideal circumstances need not diminish the importance that fact-insensitive principles of justice accord to choice and responsibility.\(^\text{33}\) Indeed, my particular takeaway could be endorsed even by those theorists who hold such a view of the purposes of political philosophy, and


even by those who have been key players in the push towards making questions about choice and responsibility central to ideal theory: In societies as they exist today, any hope of determining the extent of an agent’s responsibility for their material well-being in the kind of fine-grained detail required by authors such as Dworkin, Lippert-Rasmussen, and others, would be illusory.

In short, any account of responsibility subtle enough to be plausible from a normative point of view is likely to be all the more unfeasible from a practical point of view. Since, in reality, the subtle account of responsibility favored by most philosophers makes relative ascriptions of responsibility very difficult, if not altogether impossible, it should hardly come as a surprise that the concept of responsibility that tends to win out in real political debate is rather simplistic. From the point of view of non-ideal theory, we should give up on the illusion that we could ever integrate an extremely subtle notion of responsibility into political practice. For now, there is only one alternative to shying away from invoking responsibility in making distributive decisions: to give importance to the crude concept of responsibility which even most of those philosophers who are, in principle, sympathetic to responsibility rightfully reject.

III The No-Responsibility View
The new centrality of responsibility in philosophical thought has led to a somewhat paradoxical situation. A lot of philosophers now agree that ascriptions of responsibility are *normatively* highly significant: whether or not an agent is responsible for having less than his co-citizens, or even for being in real need of assistance, determines the degree to which they can justly claim redress. At the same time, they are much less sanguine about the circumstances in which responsibility is *ascriptively* appropriate: even comparatively simple distinctions, like those between brute and option luck, are impossibly difficult to draw in practice, making it very difficult for us to arrive at principled answers about the deserv ingness of needy individuals in real-life cases.

Especially when coupled with a passion for ameliorating the fate of the poor and a widespread concern for the breathtaking growth of material inequality over the last decades, this has made one radical response to the age of responsibility very appealing. It consists in accepting the normative dimension of prevalent thinking about responsibility, but denying its ascriptive basis. In other words, instead of taking issue with the notion that a citizen’s being responsible for finding himself in need provides us with good reason to deny him our assistance, as an older brand of egalitarians might have done, nowadays thinkers on the left arrive at a rather similar conclusion by a very different argumentative route: they deny that the poor could possibly be responsible, in the requisite sense, in the first place.
Over the past decades, variations on this stance, which I shall call the “no-responsibility view,” have become influential in ethics, political theory, and even the philosophy of law. Advocates of the “no-responsibility” view believe that virtually all talk of responsibility is a red herring. But the reason is not that they think it wrong to reward or punish fellow citizens in response to an action for which they are truly responsible. It is, rather, that they believe that (nearly) all of the actions for which we are supposedly responsible are actually beyond our control.\textsuperscript{34}

On this view, most of our actions are determined by outside factors, from luck to genetics. Once we realize the extent of these outside influences, we should conclude that we are responsible for far fewer actions than we tend to assume. (Indeed, on the most extreme versions of this view, what actions we “decide” to undertake depends solely on causal processes inside our own heads, leaving us responsible for none of our own actions at all.) But if we aren’t responsible for our own actions, then, advocates of the “no-responsibility view” conclude, it is surely wrong to punish us for acting as we did.\textsuperscript{35}


\textsuperscript{35} In the context of distributive justice, G. A. Cohen, among others, has argued that the truth of determinism would make any deviation from strict equality unjustifiable, and therefore potentially lead luck egalitarianism to collapse into strict egalitarianism. For Cohen’s view of the relation between the free will problem and
The political manifestations of the “no-responsibility” view are perfectly familiar. Indeed, they are, in one way or another, present at most times when politicians try to resist a further erosion of the welfare state. To return to the resonant phrase of which Barack Obama is so fond, the people who are in need of our help are invariably described as those who “work hard and play by the rules”—that is to say, as people who have lived up to their personal responsibility, and nevertheless ended up in a state of need. In ethics, much the same logic has been followed to its inevitable conclusion in an increasingly radical manner. Over the past decades, moral philosophers have debated the possibility of “bad moral luck.” They remarked upon the curious fact that many factors that are clearly outside our control influence our moral standing in important ways: We blame the drunk driver who kills a child more than the equally drunk driver who, for reasons beyond his own control, makes it home safe. We blame Jim, who stole an unattended laptop, more than John, who would have done the same if only he too had come across such easy pickings. And we blame Jenny, who was shuffled from one foster home to the next, for neglecting her child even though Jane, who had morally upstanding parents and grew up to be a caring mother, would have acted in the same way if she had had such a tough upbringing.

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Reflecting on the phenomenon of moral luck, philosophers began to ask themselves whether all of this could possibly make sense. Could it be fair that factors that are plainly outside of our control—such as the outcome of our actions, the circumstances in which we are placed, and even the constitutive influences that determine who we turn out to be—should affect our moral standing in such a radical way? Many responded in the negative. Once we realize to what degree our actions are influenced by factors beyond our control, they argue, our ordinary practices of praise and blame become untenable. To ensure that we are never praised or blamed on account of “outcome,” “circumstantial” or “constitutive” luck, our moral practices stand in need of radical revision—or should be abandoned altogether.\(^{38}\)

In this way, the dominant philosophical response to the age of responsibility has been not to deny the normative importance of responsibility, but rather to emphasize just how difficult it is to ascribe true responsibility for actions or outcomes to particular individuals. This has been mirrored in the wider political discourse. Since the value of personal responsibility seems unassailable, the left has

\(^{38}\) For a particularly radical account of the challenge of moral luck, see Michael Zimmermann: “Luck and Moral Responsibility,” *Ethics* Vol. 97, 1987, 374–386. Compare also the recent attempt by Michael Otsuka to argue that, while “brute moral luck” cannot influence an agent’s moral standing, it is acceptable for forms of “option moral luck” to do so: Michael Otsuka: “Moral Luck: Optional, Not Brute,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 23/1, 373-388.
focused its energies on re-describing the recipients of benefits as people who are in no way at fault for the situation in which they find themselves. The debate about what the state owes to its citizens, which should at its core be a normative question about the rightful role of equality and solidarity in capitalist democracy, now primarily revolves around increasingly complex empirical-conceptual debates about who bears responsibility for what.

IV  Responsibility Framework - Summary

Taken together, these ways of thinking about responsibility crystallize into what I propose to call a “responsibility framework.” This responsibility framework has two key features that help us to understand the contours of political thinking in the age of responsibility:

1. If somebody is thought to be responsible for a bad outcome, his or her responsibility for that outcome lessens the extent to which they have a just claim to public assistance.

2. In public debate, the question of whether or not somebody is deserving of public assistance thus primarily turns on the question of whether or not they can rightfully be considered responsible for finding themselves in a situation of need.

The responsibility framework can therefore be represented in a simple manner:
As I shall argue throughout the dissertation, however, the responsibility framework which characterizes our current political and philosophical moment is problematic in at least three ways:

1. The “responsibility framework” makes our treatment of other agents highly sensitive to the question of whether or not we believe them to be responsible for a particular outcome. As a result, we tend to underestimate the reasons we have to help people who have supposedly acted irresponsibly. (More specifically, we underestimate both the normative obligations we have towards them \textit{and} the degree to which helping them might be in the public interest due to considerations of efficiency, public health, and so on.)
2. The “responsibility framework” tempts us to import the question of responsibility into contexts where it is, in truth, normatively irrelevant. We thus end up framing debates that should turn on completely different considerations in the ever-same language of responsibility. This impoverishes our political vocabulary by pushing important values that are not easily expressed by an appeal to responsibility—such as the desire to live in a society of equals—out of view.

3. Finally, the normative commitments that make up the “responsibility framework” tempt anybody who cares about the fate of the poor to operate with an overly demanding conception of what is required for an agent to be responsible for a particular action or outcome. As a result, we tend to downplay, to deny, and even actively to diminish the degree of agency which underprivileged members of our society do, or could, exercise—a stance that, while undoubtedly well-intentioned, ultimately serves to belittle and disempower them.

My dissertation is not just a critique of the age of responsibility, however—it is also a plea for us to reclaim the political space we have ceded to talk of responsibility. If I am right, then our current focus on a very particular notion of responsibility has disastrous consequences for the kinds of relations in which we stand to our fellow citizens, and the kinds of policies we can envisage. That’s why it is high time for us to remember what answers we might give to the most pressing moral and political questions of our time if we recover the values that our focus on a particular, rather
punitive, notion of personal responsibility has pushed to the side. The way to overcome the age of responsibility, I suggest, is to embrace a positive notion of responsibility.

V The Argumentative Road Ahead

As is evident, this dissertation stands at an unusual methodological intersection. It contains elements of intellectual history, social theory, and normative political philosophy. My purposes render this mix necessary. But it is all the more important to emphasize what I do not seek to accomplish. Though I will at times discuss some abstract debates in ethics, as well as some arguments in political philosophy that are meant to establish what justice—not practicality or feasibility—demands, I mean to make a contribution neither to moral philosophy nor to “ideal theory.” On the contrary, my intention is to intervene in a specific, historically bounded political debate.

By drawing our attention to the centrality of a particular concept in our political imaginary, and emphasizing the normatively worrisome consequences that our focus on this concept has had in political reality, I hope to make it possible for us to reconceive of the political options available to us. The crux of my argument, then, need not be at odds with the views of theorists, like the luck egalitarians, who hold
that an ideal society—one that has fewer practical and empirical constraints than does ours—would accord a central role to responsibility; it need only be at odds with people who misapply normative arguments about responsibility that may or may not hold in ideal theory in order to justify the central role that responsibility plays in our actually existing, and evidently non-ideal, societies.

In this introductory chapter, I have already highlighted three potential dangers of our normative assumptions in the age of responsibility. First, the language of responsibility obscures how much we owe to people even if they are responsible for their own need. Second, it tempts us into complicated and ultimately futile discussions about whether or not certain persons, or socio-economic groups, really are responsible for their own fate. As a result, it colonizes more and more political space until virtually all debates, from welfare policy all the way to gay rights, are cast in terms of questions about responsibility—while other important political values, like solidarity and the desire to live in a community of equals, are allowed to fall fallow. And third, it implausibly denies that even our less privileged fellow citizens are capable of true agency or self-determination—and overlooks how important a role a constructive notion of responsibility can play in allowing all of us to find meaning in our lives.

In the following chapters, I hope to put some historical, empirical, and normative flesh on my characterization of the age of responsibility. For this purpose, I first turn to the roots of the age of responsibility. By providing a preliminary history of our
thinking about responsibility in Chapter 2, I both hope to show more clearly in what precise ways our political moment is unique, and to explain in greater detail how what I call the “responsibility framework” features in our political thinking. Next, in Chapter 3, I turn to the development of North American and Western European welfare states. By examining recent reform efforts, I show that that the language of responsibility has had a real impact on public policy: while features of the welfare state that are perceived as “responsibility-tracking” have largely remained intact, many features that are perceived as “responsibility-buffering” have been abolished. This, I argue, is deeply troubling from a normative point of view. Next, in Chapter 4, I examine in greater detail the most common reaction to the age of responsibility. The “no-responsibility view” accepts the punitive interpretation of responsibility outlined in the responsibility framework, yet contests that it is extremely demanding to ascribe responsibility to their action to most individuals. However, I argue that it ultimately overstates both the philosophical reasons to apply a high bar to ascriptions of responsibility and the political feasibility of convincing people to abstain from holding their fellow citizens responsible for their actions.

After this diagnostic part, I argue for a very different affirmative response to the age of responsibility. In Chapter 5, I try to show why a positive notion of responsibility is so important. Drawing on T. M. Scanlon’s work about the significance of choice, I give an account of the important self-regarding, other-regarding and societal reasons why we need to give responsibility a real role in our moral and political universe. This line of thought leads me to propose an “institutional” account of
responsibility, which uses the notion of responsibility to delineate a fair societal division of labor rather than tracking some mythical pre-institutional notion of “true” responsibility, in Chapter 6. Reconceived in this institutional manner, I argue, responsibility can be empowering rather than punitive.